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## A HISTORICAL NOTE ON THE GREY-HEADED HONEY-EATER, *MELIPHAGA KEARTLANDI*.

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Compared with most other Australian birds the known history of the Grey-headed Honey-eater, *Meliphaga keartlandi*, is short and simple. The species was described in 1895 by North, from specimens taken in the previous year by Kwartland, collector with the Horn Expedition to central Australia.

Later it transpired that Carter had known the species, from 1890 onwards, in the area of Point Cloates (see Mathews, 1924), but there is certainly no published record from before that time. Therefore the presence in the Leiden Museum of a specimen of

*Meliphaga keartlandi* of at least a century old appears worth recording. The bird had originally been mounted, like practically the whole old collection, but had been taken off its stand by van Oort (curator at the time) about 1908. Fortunately an old label remains with it, and this label, with a red edge, proves that the bird dates from the days of Temminck (director from 1820-1858) who used this type of label. Regretfully, an original collector's label is not present, and may never have existed.

The old label reads: "*Ptilotis plumulus*/♀ Gould aust. pl./Australie Sept." Without crossing out the word *plumulus*, somebody has written in pencil above it "sp.?". There is a second label, attached by van Oort, on which the name is given, in pencil and with a query, as *Ptilotis flaveseens*. The word "Sept." on the older label is, of course, an abbreviation of "Septentrionalis," northern.

What is certain is therefore that since before 1858 there has been a specimen of *Meliphaga keartlandi* in Leiden, from northern Australia, and misidentified as *Ptilotis plumulus* (*Meliphaga plumula* in modern nomenclature). There is no further indication of its origin or date of collecting.

The questions arise as to how this bird found its way to Leiden, and where, when and by whom it was collected. Though evidently proof is impossible, an intelligent guess can nevertheless be made. Practically all the old Australian material of both mammals and birds in Leiden came from one source, John Gould. Especially between 1840 and 1850, when Gould's books were in the course of publication, there was a lively correspondence (most of which is lost) and exchange between Temminck and Gould (Gould acquiring material from the East Indies and Japan, Temminck receiving mainly Australian material). Hence, there is little doubt that the specimen of *Meliphaga keartlandi* was received through Gould, who was perhaps also responsible for its misidentification. This narrows the field to an ornithological collector who was in contact with Gould, roughly between 1840 and 1855, and who, moreover, in that period had been within the range of the species.

*Meliphaga keartlandi* is a bird of arid rocky country. Therefore it can be said mainly to be a species of the far interior (see Gannon, 1962, map 12), which touches the coast on the southern shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and reaches the coast over a broad front in the north-west of Western Australia. This whole area was so remote in those days that it cannot possibly have been visited casually, and therefore the specimen of *Meliphaga keartlandi* would have been taken by one of the well-known expeditions. Furthermore, any expedition going inland from South Australia and New South Wales may probably be ignored because of the notes given on the label that the specimen in question is from northern Australia.

Though it will be obvious that absolute certainty cannot be obtained, the one expedition and collector that comes to mind as fitting all the requirements of place and time, is that of the *Beagle*, and Benjamin Bynoe (Whittell, 1954; Serventy & Whittell, 1962). In particular, it is known that Bynoe collected the type specimen of the Painted Finch, *Emblema plectra*, on Depuch Island, north-

western Australia, in June, 1840. In their selection of habitat *Emblema plectus* and *Meliphaga keartlandi* have much in common, both favouring rocky country. In 1962 a field-party of the Western Australian Museum did not meet with *Emblema plectus* on Depuch Island, but *Meliphaga keartlandi* was common (Storr, 1964).

Compared with the evidence in favour of the *Beagle* and Depuch Island, the evidence in support of other origins is but meagre; Sturt had touched on the range of *M. keartlandi* during his last expedition, but the birds collected went to the British Museum, not into Gould's private hands, and certainly they could not have been labelled as coming from northern Australia. With mention of the Leiehard Expedition of which the ornithologist, John Gilbert, was killed before entering the range of *M. keartlandi*, the obvious possibilities appear to be exhausted.

Finally a word about the identification of the bird: though the species is not otherwise represented in Leiden, the general appearance of the bird, with the blackish-grey ear-coverts, leaves no doubt about its identity. The specimen was also examined by Dr. D. L. Serventy, during his visit to Leiden in September, 1966, who agrees with this identification. It was also Dr. Serventy who at once concluded that Bynoe was the only likely collector of the specimen, and who urged me to write this note about it.

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## FROM FIELD AND STUDY

**An Occurrence of Wombats in Western Australia.**—A small colony of wombats has recently been living a few miles north-west of Caiguna in the Eucla Division of Western Australia. Prior to this discovery, it was believed that wombats did not at present extend much further west than the border of Western Australia and South Australia some 200 miles to the east.

The colony was first noticed by a rabbitier, Mr T. Larkin, who described the locality to Mr. J. Carlisle. When Mr. Carlisle visited the site in about January, 1965, he estimated that there were about 12 individuals living there. However, when he accompanied Miss J. Hos, Mr. R. Crowe and me to the site on the 12th January, 1966, we could not find any specimens. Mr. Carlisle estimated that most of the burrows had been abandoned for about 3 months, but that a single individual had continued to return to the area and had used